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Tragedy teaches a lesson: Two years after son's death, father is fighting inhalant abuse

BY: JASON LEA

It was two years ago this month that Kyle Williams, 14, of Painesville Township, died of a cardiac arrhythmia brought upon by inhalant abuse.

His heart stopped so suddenly that his mother found him lying on his bed with the straw from a can of Dust-Off, an aerosol product used to clean electronics, still in his mouth.

His father, Sgt. Jeff Williams of the East Cleveland police, has worked since Kyle's death to warn other parents of the dangers of inhalants and the signs of abuse.

Williams said the largest mistake parents can make is thinking something similar could not happen to their child.

"You can't say, 'Not my kid.' You have to know the signs, and the signs are so small, so slight. You have to know them or you'll miss them," he said.

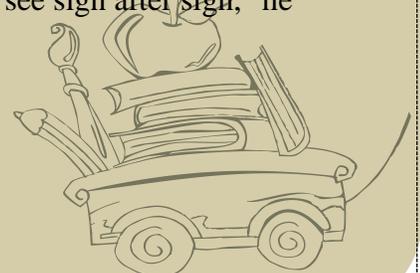
Before Kyle's death, Williams thought it would be impossible to smuggle drugs into his house. In addition to his expertise as an officer and his wife's experience as a nurse, they lived with a retired K-9 officer, Thor, who was trained to detect drugs.

Williams said Kyle exhibited most of the signs of inhalant abuse, even though he had only been experimenting for two weeks when he died. However, without prior knowledge, Williams was unable to identify the problem and possibly save his son's life.

Williams listed the symptoms - an upset stomach or vomiting, pain around the mouth or tongue, passing out, a change in behavior, and aerosol cans being used up more quickly than usual.

The symptoms can be especially difficult to detect, because separately a stomach ache or moodiness can be indicative of several other problems.

"A change in behavior - that could be any kid. That's being a teen. But when you put them together, you start to see sign after sign," he said.



Williams recalled how he bought a three-pack of Dust-Off not long before Kyle's death.

"A couple days later, they were all gone. I asked Kyle what happened to them, and he said he and his friend had been messing around and sprayed them all. That was a sign, but I didn't know it," he said.

A few days later, Kyle came home from school complaining his tongue hurt. The refrigerants in aerosol cans freeze the mouth and can be painful, but Williams and his wife did not know.

Soon thereafter, Kyle vomited. His parents kept him home the next day even though he felt fine.

"It was weird to me. I mean, how do you throw up and then feel fine the next day?" Williams said.

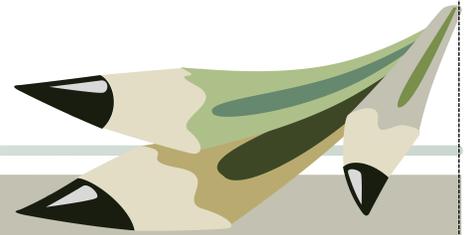
The night before Kyle died, he had a tempestuous argument with his father, which was uncharacteristic of the boy, his father said. Williams left for work thereafter. Kyle was dead the next time he saw him.

"I thought it couldn't happen in my house. I'm a cop. My wife's a nurse. I have a drug dog in the house. I was wrong," Williams said.

Williams never bore a grudge against Dust-Off for its role in his son's death.

"After Kyle died, people told me to sue. Why? I had zero interest in suing Dust-Off. How would you put a dollar amount on that?" he said.

Instead, Williams wanted to ensure that other families did not experience a similar tragedy. Since then, he has spoken to hundreds of police officers, parents, pediatricians and children on the dangers of inhalant abuse.



"I'll talk to anyone who will listen," he said.

One of the people who listened was Phil Lapin, the president and chief executive officer of Falcon Safety Products, the manufacturer of Dust-Off. Lapin had tried to introduce a bittering agent into Dust-Off before, but it was unsuccessful because the agent did not turn to gas along with the rest of the contents of the aerosol can.

After speaking with Williams, Lapin redoubled his efforts and by October 2006 a bittering agent, which made the spray unpalatable, had been added to Dust-Off.

"I believe it's now in most of their products, if not all," Williams said.

Williams said knowing he has initiated a change in the aerosol industry and spread information on the dangers of inhalant abuse is not a consolation.

"I'd still give it all up to have Kyle back. I'd give everything to have him back. If I could walk away from my home forever but have him beside me; I'd do it, and be happy about it."

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